

So Far From Home:

An Exegesis of the Catholic Brazilian Community on Martha's Vineyard

By Wendy Tillman

This initial exegesis of the Catholic Brazilian community of Good Shepherd Parish on Martha's Vineyard was originally provided as evidence of progress toward completion of learning objective for my Supervised Practice of Ministry on December 10, 2015. I conducted interviews with specific people in the parish, in positions pertinent to my practicum: the Pastor, the deacon, an assistant in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, a high school member of the community and two parents whose children attend Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for religious formation. The document titled "A Method of Exegeting a Congregation" by Lenora Tubbs Tisdale was used as a guideline for the interviews and this research paper.



The Brazilian community on Martha's Vineyard is made up of young adults, some documented and others undocumented, who left Brazil for economic factors and due to the high rate of crime. They come to the United States for employment and many leave immediate and extended families behind. On Martha's Vineyard, Brazilians find a safe environment where they are able to secure full-time year-round employment. While working here, the young men and women meet their significant others and get married. Those who are documented may get married in the church, but others do not and are only married civilly. This community places great importance on family and many members want to celebrate the sacraments and milestones "back home" with their extended family. However, the undocumented individuals are unable to travel back and forth to Brazil, putting their celebration of the sacraments on hold. There is only a small population of middle aged individuals because those with family in Brazil return home when as they age so that when they pass they may be buried with other deceased family members.

Since many people are on Martha's Vineyard with few relatives, if any, the community can be likened to a large family. They all know each other, each other's families and each other's children. They often use the church hall for celebrations where the entire community gathers.

The community is a very spiritual, worshipping community, however they do not possess a lot of knowledge about church doctrine. In Brazil, while there is a chapel

in each town, a priest may only visit once every four to six weeks, which leaves the laity in charge of their own worship most of the time. To fulfill this void, people gather in each other's houses for prayer meetings. It has taken the community years to adjust to the fact that they have fulltime access to Mass and a Priest.

While the parish offers weekly Mass in Portuguese, the congregation, true to its roots, has formed prayer groups in which members of all ages attend. The gatherings began in people's homes and became so well attended they had to move to the church chapel, which occasionally proves too small for the numbers. These prayer meetings consist of worship and praise, but little formation.

The independence created in the assemblies in Brazil can be seen in the religious formation here on the island. Family members teach younger family members what they know and learned regarding faith and Catholicism. Some community members who were teachers in Brazil assist with the formation of the teen aged children and adults. However, worshipping and praising God is more prevalent in this community and is evident in their daily life. They greet each other with "God bless you," and utter "Thanks be to God," multiple times each day. God is omnipresent to and in this community.

The community enjoys processing out of doors with the Blessed Sacrament and celebrates several rituals each year, including the feast of Our Lady of Aparecida, which is a public holiday in Brazil. There is a statue of Our Lady of Apraecida near the Tabernacle in each of the parish's three churches.

At Mass, the community uses a weekly worship aid written in Portuguese that is preprinted and purchased from a vendor. It includes the Prayers of the Faithful, which individuals read aloud from their seats in the pews. The assembly participates in more sections of the Mass than their English speaking counterparts. For example, the congregational joins in at several parts of the Eucharistic Prayer. There are also other variations in the Mass and most of the prayers and responses are sung. As the deacon said in his interview, "If it can be said, it can be sung and if it can be sung, it will be."

This community uses the side door of the church as the main entrance. Just inside the door is a table and on top of the table sits a notebook and a pen. As people enter the church, some of them write in the notebook. At the end of Mass, prior to the closing prayer, a member of the assembly reads the notebook entries. This person also recites the weekly announcements; there is no bulletin written in Portuguese.

Husband and wife members of the choir and band are from a three generational family in which the community looks to for guidance. These two lead the largest of the weekly prayer groups and have a daughter enrolled in CGS. At Mass, the

grandparents, sit with their grandchildren in the front of the church on the left side of the altar, where most of the others sit on the side right of the altar. Regina, the grandmother, is a grandmother to all in the community. She walks around beforehand greeting and conversing with the congregation. There is another community member, Lucy, who also participates in the choir and attends all of their functions. These members are key individuals to the decision making for the community and need to be included in any decisions that affect the community.

From the interviews, I conducted regarding the community and the time I spent in this community, it is evident that they are a tight knit community. The members have great reverence for God, a deep love for Jesus, and sincere consideration for one another. It is my desire to continue to exegete this community to further my understanding of its dynamics, tradition and culture.

In order to complete my Supervised Practice of Ministry, I invited parents from Brazilian families to attend a materials making session so that we could have materials in both English and Portuguese. I arranged for another catechist and two student helpers to be on hand, thus allowing the children to work in one Atrium while the parents and I worked in the Level I Atrium. I prepared the space and all of the raw materials we would need. I created opening and closing prayers in Portuguese from documents I received from the CGSUSA National Office.

On the day of the event I arrived at the Parish Center early to spend a few quiet minutes in prayer. Two mothers arrived and when their children were settled, I invited them into the Level I Atrium. One who spoke English, said she had to leave and she explained that her friend, Gabriella, was unsure of staying since she spoke little English. I offered for Gabriella to wait until other parents arrived before she joined me in the Atrium, which she did.

I waited for fifteen minutes and when no one else showed up, I approached Gabriella in the hallway. She said that she would leave and come back to pick up her girls. I returned to the Atrium and sat down with the Portuguese and English bibles where I figured that I could at least translate the scripture works. Instead, I went back to the hallway, approached Gabriella and asked, "Will you please help me?" She agreed.

We worked side by side, one work at a time, using the two bibles, the translation app on her cell phone and the internet on mine. I used simple instructions with essential words which she was able to understand and she responded in broken English. For an hour and a half we translated scripture passages, posters for the altar work and geography, prayer cards, and tracing cards.

I had a map of Brazil displayed on our work table. Santa Paulo, the location of the only known Atria I could find, was marked on the map. She smiled when she noticed the poster and communicated that that is where she is from.

The other Mom returned fifteen minutes prior to the end of the session and the three of us gathered at the prayer table for closing prayer. Each of them took a copy of the closing prayer translated into Portuguese. Ari read the first paragraph, which explained the benefits of religious formation for pre-kindergarten children. Gabriella read the second paragraph, which spoke about the Good Shepherd parable and its centrality to CGS. As she read, she began to cry. The two mothers read the last paragraph together, Psalm 23. Again, Gabriella cried.

Via Ari, I asked Gabriella if she would like to help in the Atrium. She said that she did not think it would be good for her daughter that her daughter was likely to cling to her mother if she was there. I asked if she would consider coming in for a short time at the beginning of any session where the presentation to the children could be said in both languages. She agreed.

Before they left, Ari taught me say "thank you" in Portuguese, so that I could say "obrigada" to Gabriella.

Language is not a barrier in ministry, inaction is. Two actions sprung up from this encounter: I am going to learn to speak Portuguese and I am going to schedule another materials making workshop. Learning to speak Portuguese, will allow me to work with the Portuguese speaking children in their native language, the language of their prayer life. I will schedule another materials making workshop to take place after the first of the year.